Digital leaders:
Moving into the fast lane
by Daniel Behar, Rouven Fuchs and Robert J. Thomas
Becoming the culture champion

Increasingly, adopting a digital culture is essential for successful business growth. And as any change agent will testify, change comes from within. Onboarding hearts and minds not only drives organizational shifts, but also helps to secure the digital workforce of the future.

Cultivating a digital culture starts at the top. Yet, Accenture Strategy research found that 54 percent of business leaders are prepared to be a fast follower or adopt a “wait and see” attitude to becoming a digital business.¹

It is not enough to be aware of the demands of digital disruption. Leaders need to accelerate their own digital credentials so that they can effectively manage the cultural and competitive challenges faced by their workforces and organizations. To achieve digital transformation on the inside—operations, culture, practices, and workforce—as well as on the outside—company image and employee appeal—execution relies on the clear commitment and direction of business leaders.

¹Accenture Strategy Executive Research 2015

Cultivating a digital culture starts at the top.
Adopting a digital mind-set

For new competitive entrants, unencumbered by traditional practices, building a greenfield digital organization is relatively easy. Tackling entrenched practices and behaviors is more challenging. Managing digital disruption involves adopting certain characteristics.

For instance, leaders can encourage the workforce of the future to innovate and take risks. A focus on the bigger picture—and the outcomes and metrics that support it—can help to ease the impact of disruption. And prioritizing people is essential, with good collaboration across the enterprise that helps to inspire progress.

Accenture Strategy research shows that only 34 percent of business leaders are well prepared for digital in terms of the right leadership and management practices. And only 39 percent feel they are well prepared with the changes needed in skill and job mix of the workforce. So how can leaders infuse a digital mind-set—in themselves and their organizations? By promoting a digital culture, leaders can drive clarity for the workforce on the organization’s strategy, values and goals from the outset of any digital journey.

Although understanding the competitive advantage of being digital is important, converting digital aspirations into reality is even more essential. Only 21 percent of business leaders in our study would call themselves a digital business today and less than one-half (47%) have implemented a digital strategy at an enterprise level. By demonstrating digital thinking and knowledge, leaders can fast track digital execution.

Employees are not overly concerned about the potential changes from digital. Seventy-one percent said they are proactively learning new digital tools and technical skills to be ready for the demands of social media, collaboration tools, mobile applications, robots, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and wearables. These workforce motivations, to support the organization in its digital journey, can be reinforced when a leader becomes a digital champion. By acting as a digital role model, leaders can maximize the potential of their employees to not only reinforce a digital culture but also shape the workforce of the future.
Digital transformation in utilities

A major European utility company undertook a global transformation journey to create a new digital workforce for its power production service line. Senior executives in the company sought to enhance digital awareness to create a mind-set and momentum that would swiftly encourage collaboration and networking, create a sense of urgency and drive change within a new digital generation of managers.

Headed up by 10 management committee members and 20 digital champions, the program aimed to engage leaders to become sponsors of digital transformation and innovation coaches. The program focused on developing capabilities through defining new digital skills and forecasting learning needs. It also realigned management by empowering them to adopt an "experiment and initiate" approach.

The utilities company has kick started both "quick-wins" and long term outcomes. What is more, the company has initiated a program of generating innovative ideas that has the potential to deliver tangible, measurable results.
Advancing digital DNA

Ownership of an organization’s digital strategy is being elevated—all the way to the CEO for 28 percent of our surveyed companies. To hone in on the digital agenda, 31 percent of business leaders are assigning digital strategy ownership to a Chief Digital Officer.

Yet digital execution varies across the world. In a survey of Germany’s Top 500 companies, more than one-third (35 percent) of the interviewed leaders consider the top management team’s failure to specify objectives or requirements to be a “very big” or “big” obstacle to digitization. And the digital agenda involves far more than business operations. Ninety-two percent of surveyed business leaders said it is critical or important that they take actions now to transition their workforce to succeed in the digital economy. In doing so, business leaders need to make digital part of their own DNA, infuse their organizations’ cultures with a digital mind-set and create the workforce of the future.

2 Courage to think differently: Digitization strategies of Germany’s Top 500, Accenture in collaboration with Die Welt, 2015
Ask yourself:

How can I drive digital awareness?
Support the efforts of your workforce by investing in your own personal change journey to manage digital disruption and keep up-to-date with the latest digital thinking. For example, leaders can undertake a dedicated digital awareness session that helps to evaluate what is happening today, explore what might happen tomorrow, discuss how innovation can influence digital transformation and agree the next steps.

How can I spread the (digital) word?
Identify digital champions to coach and facilitate digital discovery, expertise development, and behavior adoption. Take advantage of digitally savvy employees, often millennials, by using them as reverse mentors to build your digital credentials. Recruit millennials to act as a sounding board for change and help to promote digital multipliers across the business.

How can I maintain momentum?
Introduce a scheme which rewards a trial and error culture to drive innovation. For example, leaders can connect with innovative companies to stimulate start-up thinking, collaborate in the community, or participate in digital immersion workshops. The workshops can evaluate existing digital practices, assess future implications, identify who needs to be involved and how in digital practices and explore the new products or services that can be realized through collaboration.

How can I secure commitment?
Addressing your own leadership behaviors demonstrates commitment to a new culture. Leaders can enhance the organization using collective intelligence that helps the workforce “buy in” to agreed outcomes and encourages a culture of collaboration. For example, Dr. Craig Baker, Chief of Cardiac Surgery at the University of Southern California (USC), developed his private store of data, articles and videos into a public “brain,” accessible to students in his absence. It has since become a team brain—a resource for a rapidly evolving field—built with contributions from colleagues at USC and beyond.3

Leaders have always recognized the need to flex their organizations. Now, in a climate of digital disruption, they have an opportunity to lead by example to help their organizations adopt a digital culture and prepare the workforce of the future.

3 How Smart CEOs Use Social Tools to Their Advantage, Robert J. Thomas and Yaarit Silverstone, Harvard Business Review, March 2015
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